

Fifty years on from '67 & still fighting for rights: Reflecting on the "four R's" – Racism, Redfern Statement, Recognition & Reconciliation

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Acknowledgement of country

I wish to acknowledge the Welcome to Country by Mickey O'Brien from the Kaurna peoples of South Australia and pay my respects to Elders past, present and future.

I also wish to recognise the following:-

Peter Buckskin and Helen Connolly, Co-chairs of Reconciliation SA, Mark Waters, Mark Waters, State Manager of Reconciliation SA and Board members, Shirley Peasley, Jo Willmot, Alison and Una Ravenscroft (my God-daughter who is in the program photo).

I would like to begin this morning by sharing with you a little of my own story. In 1967, I was 11 years old, living in Inala, Brisbane with my War Widowed Mother and three siblings. Conditions were typical of Aboriginal families in those days – poor and attempting to eke out a better existence than our ancestors had endured. Many of you know the story only too well.

But fifty years ago, on 27 May, Australia held a referendum for which there was overwhelming support throughout the country. There are many misconceptions about what the referendum was all about.

Some believe that it allowed Aboriginal people to vote. Others that it made Aboriginal people full citizens, or entitled to equal pay for equal work.

In fact, the referendum brought about change to two sections of the Constitution.

Prior to the referendum Section 127 of the Constitution prevented Aborigines from being included in the national census, and Section 51 specified that federal laws did not apply to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

To that point, states had responsibility for providing services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Aborigines had different rights in different states, and did not have the right to federally funded services like social security and higher education.

The referendum changed the Constitution to give the Commonwealth parliament the power to make laws for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

In fact, the Commonwealth Government had been involved in Aboriginal Affairs in the Northern Territory since 1911, and prior to 1967 had the ability to affect Indigenous affairs by exercising its power under s 96 of the Constitution to make special purpose grants subject to specific conditions to the States.

However, the 1967 referendum gave the Federal Government specific power to make laws regarding Aboriginal affairs.

The referendum did not grant the Commonwealth exclusive responsibility for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs -- it simply allowed Commonwealth involvement.

For the first several years after the referendum the Commonwealth government did not exercise its power in any significant way, but it did appoint a Minister for Aboriginal Affairs in 1968.

With the passage of time, several laws have been enacted in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Another change has been in the definition of Aboriginality by governments in order to access services. Rather than focusing on the percentage of "Aboriginal blood" a person had, in the 1980s governments adopted definition based on heritage, self-identification and community acceptance:

An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander is a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent who identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and is accepted as such by the community in which she or he lives.

What has changed since the 1967 referendum?

Well, much has changed in Australia generally, including for Aboriginal people, since I was 11 as that little girl who gave out YES badges to people on the streets proudly with my Mum and siblings, and in ways that were incomprehensible at that time. Although I never understood, Mum kept saying "We will be FREE people, FREE people".

Who could have foreseen the level of affluence most Australians now enjoy?

Who could have foreseen mobile phone and the Internet?

Who could have foreseen so many of us enjoying international tourism and art?

Who could have imagined a woman Prime Minister, an Aboriginal woman Social Justice Commissioner or Aboriginal professors in our universities, especially here in South Australia?

While many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples also share in this prosperity – much of it the result of mining and resource extraction in remote locations – especially in recent years – a great many of us do not, and particularly those of us who live in remote communities.

Many of us have been left behind, as forgotten peoples. In this respect, not much has changed.

Let me reflect in more detail about what has, and has not, changed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. I want to talk about the political, economic and social realm.

While many Australians thought that the passage of the referendum would end racial discrimination, the lives of most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people did not change very little in the short term, and for too many of us, it has not changed very much since then.

Since the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788, there has been a consistent, enduring aspect to race relations in this country, and it is this:

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have endured people – mostly well meaning, but not all – doing things **to** us and **for** us, rather than **with** us.

This is the most important point that I will make today so it bears repeating:

We must overcome the tendency for people to do things **to** us and **for** us, rather than working collaboratively **with** us.

I will return to this theme later on, but for now, let me give you some examples of what I am talking about.

The Stolen Generations

The most egregious case is that which led to the Stolen Generations. I think there is no-one in this room who would not be aware of the circumstance which led to the taking away of our children and having them raised with strangers – almost always white families or in institutions – so that they could be assimilated into the ways of the dominant culture.

I suppose that for most of those on the front line who formulated and implemented this policy, they did so with good intentions. But it led to untold misery for a great many families – children were ripped away from bereft parents, and effectively alienated from them – in many cases for decades, if not the rest of their lives.

I can only imagine the pain and suffering that this caused, and how I would have reacted to this trauma – which I might add, continued in parts of this country until the 1970s.

Although it must be said that some of those who were stolen ended up with loving families who gave them a good start in life – for many others it was not like that. They ended up forcibly divorced from their culture with a vague identity, sometimes in violent – or at least loveless – environments where they were trained for menial jobs. They were not freed from prejudice and discrimination against them, but had no family or community support to help them face these challenges.

Fortunately, the injustice of this element of our history is now widely recognized – most importantly by Prime Minister Rudd in his apology in 2008.

Land rights

Another most serious incursion on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples was the doctrine of *terra nullius* – that is, that the land was free to be taken by European settlers following their arrival in 1788.

The effect was that Aboriginal people were driven from the land they occupied and into missions and settlements in out-of-the-way places or the peripheries of towns and cities.

Clans and tribes with different languages and cultures were mixed together, leading not only to a loss of land essential for our livelihoods, but cultural dispossession whereby English became the lingua franca and customs and cultural practices were prohibited, discouraged, or very difficult to maintain.

The loss of this economic base and social structure were another trauma from which we still struggle to overcome.

A breakthrough in this domain occurred in 1992 when the High Court ruled in favour of the now famous Eddie Mabo, a Torres Strait Islander man, whose claim to ancestral land was upheld and led to the over-turning of the *terra nullius* doctrine.

The passage of Native Title legislation during the Keating government years was the cause of hope for many of us, and it has resulted in the handing back of land to traditional owners in locations across the country.

However, I need to say that there are major – and increasing – limitations on this process. Few in the general community realize the extraordinarily long, difficult and expensive process involved in proving traditional ownership.

While native title has been granted for substantial parts of northern Australia, particularly in the Northern Territory, in southern states such as NSW, only around 2 percent of the land has been successfully claimed under native title legislation.

Meanwhile governments have passed a great deal of legislation which restricts native title claims. Here in South Australia, the most famous example is the Hindmarsh Island bridge case, but there are many others around the nation.

I come now to the Reconciliation movement. I must thank Reconciliation South Australia for the opportunity to speak to you this morning. I also want to recognize the good work that the reconciliation movement does and to congratulate and thank everyone at this breakfast for their participation.

Some of you will know of my commitment and involvement in the reconciliation movement as a past Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation member, Co-Chair Reconciliation Australia and presently Patron Reconciliation Queensland Incorporated with Dame Quentin Bryce.

Many of you will remember the heady days of the 1990s when the Reconciliation movement was borne. And here I want to acknowledge the role of Pat Dodson, now Senator Dodson, and Dr Evelyn Scott as the former Chairs of CAR. I can tell you many a story about those days.

Many of you will remember the Sydney Harbour Bridge walk in May 2000. While the prime minister of the day chose not to attend, an estimated 250,000 people came out to demonstrate their support for reconciliation.

I even remember our Deputy Chair Sir Gus Nossal stating that he'd be a monkey's uncle if 250,000 people did not walk across the Harbour that day. To our nervous minders and media officers he proved to be spot on. We now know that some one million people walked across bridges all over Australia that week for Reconciliation.

Perhaps a positive outcome has been specification of targets and programs to close the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on one hand, non-Indigenous Australians on the other. Initially, 6 targets were identified – three related to health and three related to education, and each

year, a report has been handed down by the government of the day, regarding progress in achieving the targets.

Despite the millions of dollars poured into this project, the gap has remained stubbornly in place, and if anything, is growing in a number of areas. In the most recent report, in February this year, the Prime Minister informed us that six of the seven current targets are not on track.

Last year, Reconciliation Australia reported the results of a survey which showed that almost half (46%) of Aboriginal people had experienced racism in the previous 6 months and half (49%) had witnessed racism in the past six months. These figures suggest that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live in a hostile land.

Racism demeans and makes us lesser than. Friends, if I had time I could tell you, as every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person in this room could tell you of our encounters with racism. For example in 2000 Evelyn Scott and I had just finished a meeting with the Australian Human Rights Commission in Sydney before the walks. We were wanting to go to the airport and the taxi driver would not take us. Evelyn was splendid as usual in her stunning outfit and black hat. I am also partial to dressing up. The driver pointed to us and said he wasn't taking the two of YOU. We didn't know what we had done, except we were Black.

To the credit of the taxi que they refused to get into the taxi either. He went to the far of the line and a gentleman on the phone jumped in. Later we saw him and the airport and he offered to assist if we took the driver to court which we didn't. But these are daily occurrences.

As are incarceration rates which have seen in the last 10 years an increase of 88% happening. Aboriginal women are the fastest growing prison population in the country, if not the world.

Most of us are aware of the shocking incarceration rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

While about 2 percent of the adult population, we make up over a quarter (27%) of the prison population.

About three-quarters Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners had previously served sentences, compared to less than half non-Indigenous prisoners

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people are about 17 times more likely to be involved in the justice system than their non-Indigenous peers.

This week we see the National Week of Action for Family Matters.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children make up 5.5% of all Australian children, yet in 2014-15 they constituted over one-third of all children placed in out-of-home care.

The placement rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care is almost ten times that of non-Indigenous children (52.5 per 1,000 children, in contrast with 5.5 per 1,000 for non-Indigenous children).

I can say that these figures are a manifestation of the inter-generational trauma suffered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We must work harder to turn these figures around.

Summary

Taken as a whole and put simply, there is crisis in Indigenous Affairs.

Why are all these programs not achieving their goals? In my view, it is because too many people are doing things **to** us and **for** us, rather than working collaboratively **with** us.

The National Congress of Australia's First Peoples

With my colleague, Rod Little, I am privileged to serve as a co-chair of the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples. It's a mouthful, so we abbreviate it to Congress, or National Congress.

Congress is a representative body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. It was established in 2010 and has grown steadily so that it now comprises over 180 organisations and almost 9,000 individual members, who elect a board of directors.

Congress advocates self-determination and the implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous peoples. Congress believes that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be central in decisions about our lives and communities, and in all areas including our lands, health, education, law, governance, and economic empowerment. It promotes respect for our cultures and recognition as the core of the national heritage.

To date, Congress's main foci have been Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues in the areas of health, education, land and sea rights, justice, Constitutional recognition, and sovereignty. In addition, Congress has been involved in a wide range of other issues, including cultural maintenance and development, including languages; government relations, including treaty discussions; employment and economic empowerment; housing; family violence; children and youth; disabilities; and governance and leadership.

While there are many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations representing particular sectors such as health or law, or jurisdictions, Congress serves as the peak body, taking a national and multi-sector perspective. It's job is to help coordinate and unify our people and organisations.

Someone said to me just yesterday that Congress has been resuscitated after a near death experience and I am proud to say we have.

The Redfern Statement

One of Congress' best achievements is the bringing together of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak organisations and others in civil society for the Redfern Statement in June last year in Redfern. This was in response to the invisibility of Aboriginal issues in the election platform and the crisis we were in. We wanted the government to sit up and take notice that we needed meaningful engagement.

The theme of the Redfern Statement is clear: *We have the solutions!* It is a pitch for governments and other organisations to work collaboratively with us.

The Redfern Statement calls on the Commonwealth to help us establish national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representative bodies for education, employment and housing.

It contains sections on

health

justice

preventing violence, especially against women and children

child safety, wellbeing and cultural identity, and

disability

The Redfern Statement draws on our organisations and leaders who have many years of experience in working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and who know what works and what does not.

In coming months, more of our organisations will sign on to the Redfern Statement and add their wisdom.

In February this year, Congress and the Redfern Statement signatories organised a breakfast at Parliament House in Canberra to share our vision and experience with the government to demonstrate our unity and to recommend that it start working much more closely together to achieve outcomes that will help close the gap, and lead to reconciliation.

My absolute belief is that we can change our people's life circumstances around through this liberating work.

Next week I head to Uluru with over 200 of our mob to discuss Constitutional Recognition. This is to look at the work culminated by the twelve regional dialogues across the country, to build a people's movement for reform and present a statement to the Australian people.

The future

I would like to close by presenting you with a vision for the future, followed by a short video produced for the occasion of presenting Prime Minister Turnbull with the Redfern Statement at Parliament House in Canberra in February.

It is my fervent hope that together we can create an Australia in which:

All Australians learn about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history and cultures

All Australians take pride in our nation's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage

All Australians work together to overcome the dark chapters in our collective history

There is no gap in life expectancy, the health, education and economic well-being between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous Australians. We have parity.

We work together, know each other, value each other, and go forward together.

I look to you and the Reconciliation movement to help achieve this vision of the future.

Thank you.

VIDEO PRESENTATION HERE

THE END

